

Dry-fly in the Dales

Paul Procter explores the ever-changing Swale, a Yorkshire river that rises and falls in the blink of an eye and is home to a fine stamp of wild brownies and grayling

The attractive stretch of the Swale at Lowenthwaite Bridge, above Richmond.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ROD CALLEBADE



Paul Procter is a vice president of the Wild Trout Trust, an AAPGAI master instructor, guide and renowned fly-tyer.

THE FLY-LINE SPRANG back and crash-landed in an ugly heap one yard to my left. My shoulders slumped and I was heard to say “For the love of Jesus” (or words to that effect).

I was waist-deep in the upper Swale. Twenty minutes had been spent battling a buffeting downstream breeze, trying to reach an intermittent riser under the far bank. Deep beery water had prevented me approaching as closely as I would have liked and I had been forced to make longer-than-normal casts. Having eventually placed a fly in front of the fish, it had obliged with a head-and-tail rise. It was a good trout by Swale standards, but I had snatched at the rod, rather than tightened the line, and pulled the fly from its jaws.

I swallowed my disappointment and told myself that it was early in the day and there was still time for my luck to change.

The Swale etches a course across 73 miles of the northern Yorkshire Dales. When you first clap eyes on its upper reaches you sense the wildness and instability of an environment battered by nature. The Swale is reputed to be one of the country’s fastest rising and falling rivers. The name Swale is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *Sualuae*, which means “rapid” and “liable to flooding”. Consequently, boulders and rocks are constantly shifting, altering pools every year, even month by month. It is a forbidding habitat and you can only marvel at the toughness of the wild brown trout, one of the few creatures that thrive here.

The upper river’s fast-flowing and rocky dubs only give way to more classic pools (neck, glide, tail) when you reach Castle Falls (or Swale Falls) at Richmond. This magnificent series of cascades is thought to be a natural boundary, preventing grayling and other species from spreading upstream. The river still floods downstream, but tree-lined banks provide more protection, and the pools remain stable in all but the angriest spates. Barbel and chub frequent these parts and while they may not top the game-fisher’s wish-list, they fight hard when hooked.

Richmond and District Angling Society (RADAS) controls stretches above and below Castle Falls. I started upstream of Richmond, above Lowenthwaite Bridge, where club secretary Philip Brown joined me and was itching to get going. It was “proper trout water”. There were so many riffles and pools to explore that there would be no danger of falling over each other in our bid to find fish. First, we scouted around a couple of pools in search of rises. A gentle blip broke the surface in the middle of the river, but my patient wait for a further sign went unrewarded so I climbed into



Paul's painstaking approach is rewarded with a fish from a difficult lie.

the water to cover the area - just in case. Sometimes you just know when you face a hiding to nothing and despite several fly changes, the fish didn't show again - even a small nymph failed me.

Philip had the advantage of knowing the water and decided to drop in at favourite spots, here and there, first trying his hand with a dry-fly before switching to Spiders. My strategy? A leisurely stroll in search of dimpling trout. You can cover a fair chunk of water like this and, if nothing else, at least I'd get a feel for the river. While I walked a brisk downstream breeze increased by a couple of notches and made life increasingly difficult.

Eventually, refuge was found on a long sweeping bend shrouded by willow and alder trees. Here a calm buffer extended a few yards out from the far bank. Any fly drifting downstream would almost certainly be drawn into this inviting slick. After ten minutes of watching I saw a faint rise, tight in, against an overhanging alder. I had a large Klinkhamer on my leader, a "searching" pattern, but

this was removed in a blur of fingers, to be replaced by a small black dry-fly. One thing that's usually true of the upper stretches of any river is that terrestrials form a good portion of a trout's diet. I flicked my fly into position a yard upstream of where the trout had shown. The trap was set ... and sprung seconds later. A fit fish of more than 1 lb leapt several times before it was guided into the waiting net.

By late morning, more trout had decided to look up for a snack. Good numbers of needle fly were being blown across the surface, but the subtle rises I spotted suggested that the fish were feeding on something else. I had a quick poke around in the slack water and found scores of black gnats - although none were flitting about, probably because of the blustery conditions. A deep channel separated me from the rising fish and I was fed up with throwing long casts. The only crossing point was several hundred yards away and so I faced a hike...

Finally, I eased closer to a cluster of feeding trout beside what was now my nearside bank. Sip, sip, sip... They were having a feast. In these circumstances, experience tells me that as long as you don't fluff the cast, you have a strong chance of getting a response. But you must avoid the scattergun approach of flinging your fly up there and hoping. It is far better to single out a "back marker", or loner on the flanks, and stay with your choice until some kind of conclusion. Once again the breeze hampered presentation, but perseverance finally paid off in the form of two spanking Swale trout, proportioned like athletes, with large black spots and dark backs. You would be hard pressed to find a better stamp of fish.

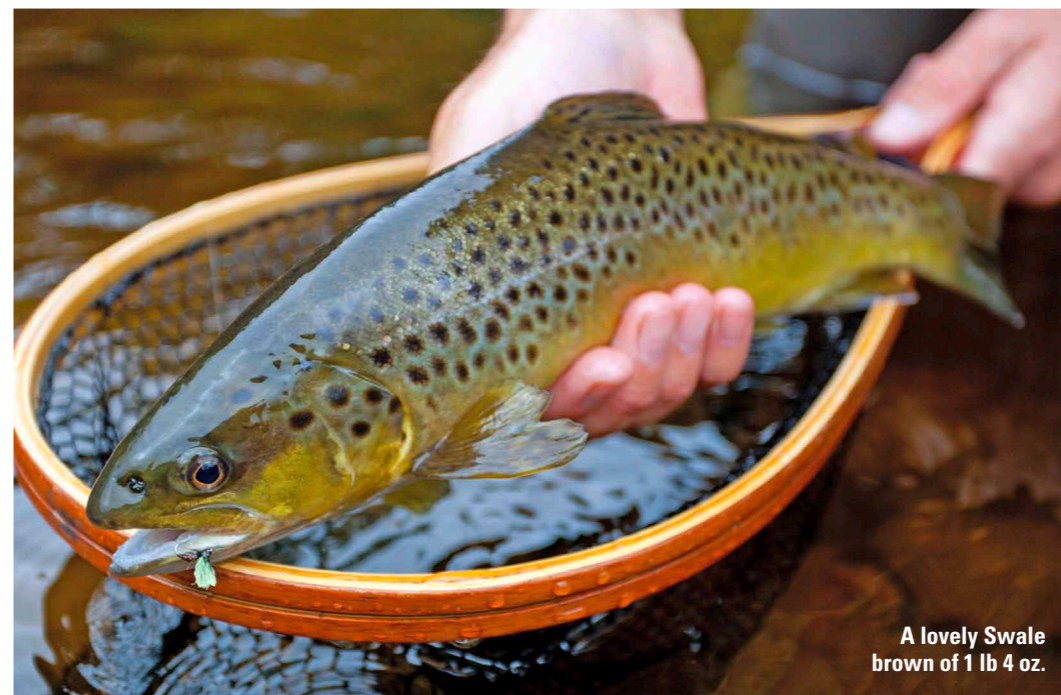
As much as I enjoyed the challenge of the niggling wind, it finally chased me downstream, close to Richmond, where towering trees provided some welcome shelter. We were below Castle Falls now and that's grayling territory. There are boulder-strewn dubs and long, mirror-like glides - something to suit all tastes. Philip started on a pool tail, his sights firmly set on a handful of good trout. Fast water rushing around a corner caught my eye, especially where several currents plaited and formed a single main flow. Where this slowed, several blipping disturbances could be seen. Often the aftermath would be a single bubble - the hallmark of a grayling rise. I never tire of lifting into these innocuous-looking rises only for the water to erupt as another grayling bids for freedom.

Having done well in the pool tail, Philip then appeared at my shoulder and suggested we try elsewhere. He led me to a slow, meandering pool, guarded on both sides by deciduous woodland, and stretching for hundreds of yards before disappearing from sight. This was dry-fly water to die for. Here, trout and grayling were happy to mingle as they scoffed adult black gnats. Greenfly were ▶

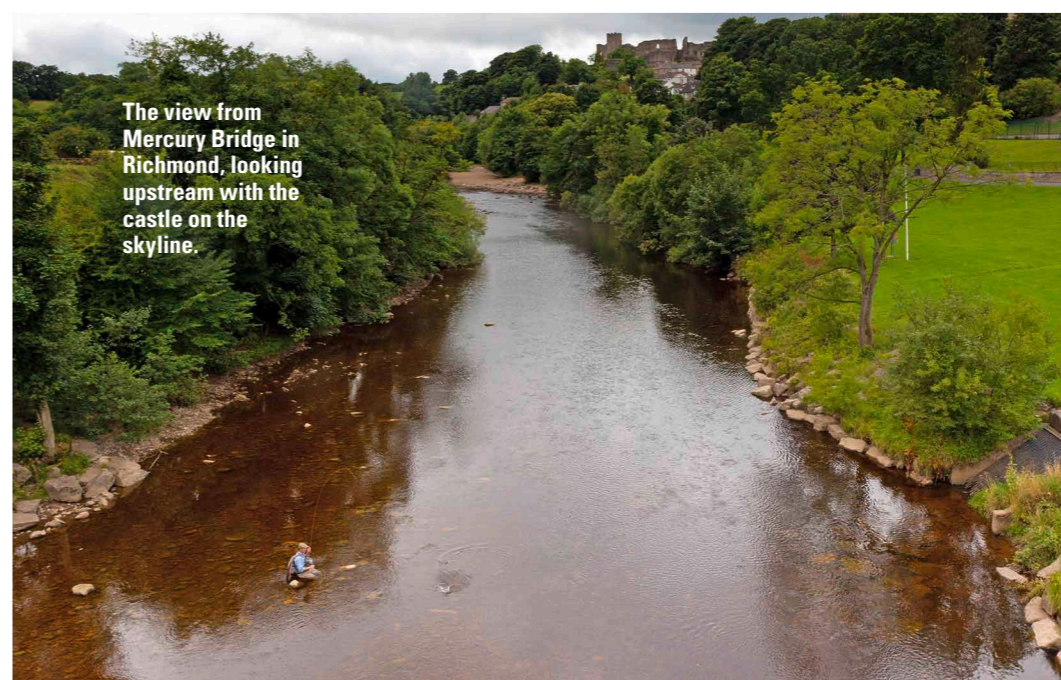
"I flicked my fly into position a yard upstream of where the trout had shown. The trap was set ... and sprung seconds later"



Closing in on a subtle rise above Marske Bridge, near the top of Richmond and District's waters.



A lovely Swale brown of 1 lb 4 oz.



The view from Mercury Bridge in Richmond, looking upstream with the castle on the skyline.

The River Swale at a glance

■ **Target species** Above Castle Falls the wild brown trout grow up to 1 lb 12 oz - a fairly big size, considering the terrain. Below the Falls (Richmond town centre) grayling thrive and the numbers of trout increase, too, making this extremely well-populated water.

■ **Season** The trout season begins on March 25 and ends on September 30. Grayling can be fished for from June 16, through winter, until March 14.

■ **Best times** April and May will appeal to those who enjoy fishing Spiders or dry-flies during a hatch. High in the dales, terrestrials of one species or another can fall throughout the summer and encourage fish to look up even on the warmest days. August and September are well worth considering, especially on the lower, tree-lined sections where aphids occur.

Those seeking grayling should focus on October and November for surface sport. The colder months see grayling forming ever-tighter shoals and when nymphs and bugs are bound to score.



Beware! The Swale rises quickly.

■ **Access and wading** Parking areas are clearly marked on detailed maps provided online by Richmond and District Angling Society (www.richmondangling.org.uk) and access to all beats is easily found. Wading is straightforward on the lower reaches, with mixed gravel underfoot and some small boulders, with footpaths and shelving banks in many places. Further upstream, much larger boulders and rocks make wading that bit more tricky and a staff is needed.

■ **Recommended tackle** Although tree-lined in many places, the broad river below Castle Falls rarely restricts casting and therefore outfits of 8 ft 6 in up to 10 ft, rated for 3-weight up to 5-weight lines, will suffice. In fact, longer rods can be beneficial, especially if Spider- or nymph-fishing. Higher up the dale, the river is narrower, but few casting restrictions exist and rod length is rarely an issue. Again the longer rod helps hold fly line of water to achieve truer drifts, even when using dry fly techniques.

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obvious, too. Presentation was critical: get it right and we would be “in”. Philip did well with a small olive Klinkhamer while I stuck to my trusty terrestrial. We could have spent hours there, but the upper reaches of the river were calling.

Far up the dale I discovered a much narrower Swale that bore little resemblance to the promising pools below Richmond. The water picks its way around mossy boulders and every so often tumbles into inky dubs. There are a few proper pools, but it’s a long walk between them. This thin water demands your respect and a softly, softly approach. Despite our careful progress and scrutiny we managed to spook several trout holding in water barely deep enough to cover their backs. A bulge zig-zagging upstream signalled their departure.

“This thin water demands your respect and a softly, softly approach”

You must sneak into position and the fly must land like blossom. Forget about trying to evade protruding boulders by curving or mending your line around them. It’s better to allow your line to drape over their smooth ancient tops. Satisfaction is gained by fooling the fish. They average only 8 oz, but occasionally a solid pounder crops up that leads you a merry dance through a maze of rocks.

The Richmond and District water is full of character and charm. Many fishers will gravitate to the lower reaches in pursuit of its vast shoals of grayling. There are big trout to be found there, too. But I prefer the upper beats. The numbers of fish don’t match those found below Castle Falls, but for me a true measure of success is winkling out edgy trout in a testing environment.



The River Swale at a glance

■ **Beat description** Richmond and District Angling Society controls 14 miles of river, consisting of double- and single-bank beats. The upper parts tend to be fast flowing with plenty of tumbling water. There are few pools, but plenty of dubs, pocket water and quiet spots behind boulders.

Below Castle Falls the river widens considerably and classic pool structures exist with neck water giving way to smooth glides before tailing out into the next pool.

■ **Fly life** In spring there are good numbers of large dark olives and flurries of large brook duns. March browns are said to be making a comeback, too. Olive uprights put on a good show throughout May and the chances are you will see a smattering of turkey browns.

There are plenty of large stonefly species – trout will readily take their nymphs but the prehistoric-looking winged adult is of little interest. Various sedges flit about in the summer evenings.

Terrestrials of various types can be expected: black gnats, hawthorns and beetles are the most obvious.

Willow and needles flies dominate the back-end when at times their presence can be overwhelming!



Patterns for the Swale (left to right): Paradox, Klinkhamer and a bead-head Pheasant-tail nymph.

■ **Favourite flies** Being a Dales river, Spiders are an obvious choice. Stewart’s Black, Waterhen Bloa and Snipe & Purple are popular with the locals. RADAS secretary Philip Brown prefers a Greenwell’s, which kills trout during spring – when the wet-fly fails him, he simply switches to a dry version.

A small (size 16-20) olive or black F-Fly works a treat on flat, smooth water with

trout and grayling. Where the currents quicken, parachute dressings such as a Klinkhamer or a Paradox in grey or olive shades will serve you well. Don’t neglect an Elk Hair Caddis, either, as this can be dynamite in the frothing pots or dubs.

During spates or drops in water temperature, nymphs or bugs are effective. A buggy-looking pink/orange Shrimp or Czech-nymph dressing will appeal to grayling, as will a cased-caddis imitation. Small bead-heads, such as a Pheasant-tail nymph or Hare’s Ear, are ideal for searching shallow runs or suspending beneath a buoyant dry-fly, New Zealand style.

■ **Guides** Steve Rhodes of GoFishing UK provides guiding on the Swale and other Dales rivers. For information or bookings, call: 01756 748 378 or 07717 533 177. E-mail: steve@goflyfishinguk.com Web: www.goflyfishinguk.com

Stuart Minnikin of Yorkshire Dales Flyfishing also guides on the Swale and other Dales rivers. For information or bookings, call: 0776 176 2660. E-mail: stuart@yorkshire-dales-flyfishing.com Web: www.yorkshire-dales-flyfishing.com

■ **Permits** Day-tickets for trout and grayling are £6. Visit the RADAS website: www.richmondangling.org.uk Tickets are available from:

Castle Walk Sports, 14 Finkle Street, Richmond DL10 4QB. Tel: 01748 824 144.

West End Post Office, 1 Reeth Road, Richmond DL10 4EH. Tel: 01748 822 305.

■ **Where to stay** The Black Lion Hotel is a popular former Georgian coach house just off Richmond town square. Web: www.blacklionhotelrichmond.co.uk For details of other hotels, guest houses and B&Bs in the area, visit: www.richmond.org/accommodation/search.html

This fit grayling came from a fast run below the castle in the centre of Richmond.

